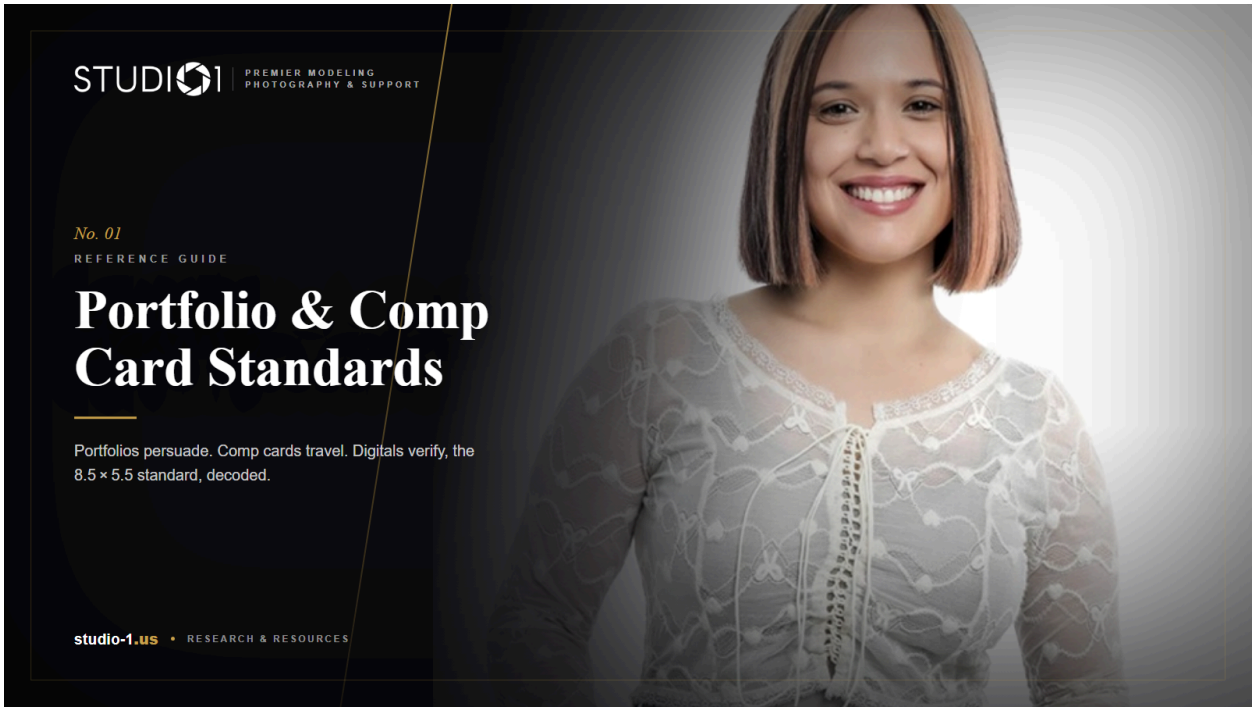
The Modeling Portfolio & Comp Card Standard: A Complete Reference Guide to What the Industry Actually Expects (2026)



Introduction: Why This Topic Matters Now

New talent often assumes modeling is judged on appearance alone. In practice, appearance is only the raw material. What gets a model taken seriously is whether their **marketing materials meet a professional standard** - the same standard a casting director, agent, or client sees hundreds of times a month.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics describes this plainly in its occupational profile for models: models "put together and maintain up-to-date portfolios and composite cards," and typically bring both to casting calls and client auditions. In other words, maintaining these materials isn't optional polish; a national labor authority lists it as part of the job itself.

The problem is that the internet is saturated with contradictory advice about what those materials should contain. This guide fixes that by anchoring every specification to neutral, verifiable references.

Background and Context: The Three Documents Every Model Needs

There are three core assets, and confusing them is the most common beginner mistake.

1. **The portfolio (the "book").** A curated collection of a model's strongest images, shown in person at interviews and castings. In the industry these interviews are literally called "go and sees" - appointments where a model presents their portfolio to a client or agency.
2. **The comp card (composite card / zed card / sed card).** A printed marketing card that condenses the portfolio into a single, leave-behind piece. It functions, in effect, as a model's professional business card - one hero image plus a handful of representative looks and key statistics.
3. **The digitals (also called polaroids or snapshots).** Clean, minimally styled photos - usually plain background, natural light, little to no makeup - that show a model's current, unretouched appearance. Digitals are not portfolio art; they are a truthful reference.

A useful way to remember the split: the **portfolio persuades**, the **comp card summarizes and travels**, and the **digitals verify**.

Current State: Comp Card Specifications

The comp card is the most standardized of the three, which is why it's the best place to start.

Dimensions. According to encyclopedic reference, the comp card's common **U.S. format is 8.5″ × 5.5″** (half of a standard Letter sheet), while the **metric format is A5** printed on heavy card stock (roughly 350–400 g/m², or about 12pt / 300–450 micrometers in thickness). For context, A5 measures 148 × 210 mm (5.8″ × 8.3″), and U.S. half-letter measures 5.5″ × 8.5″ (140 × 216 mm) - which is why the two formats look nearly interchangeable in a casting folder.

Layout. A comp card contains a **minimum of two sides**:

- **Front (cover):** a single, full-size portrait - usually the model's strongest, most identifiable image.
- **Back (interior):** a selection of representative portfolio shots, commonly arranged as a grid of several looks, alongside the model's statistics and contact information.

Color. Almost all comp cards today are printed in color, though they may include black-and-white images.

Statistics printed. Standard practice is to print the model's basic measurements: height, weight, the "three sizes" (bust–waist–hips for women; suit/chest, waist, and inseam for men), shoe size, eye color, hair color, and contact details. Present these accurately - the whole point of the card is fast, honest reference.

Data-Backed Analysis: The Standard Shot Types

A portfolio and comp card are built from a recognizable vocabulary of shots. Each communicates something specific.

Shot type	What it is	Why it's included
Headshot	A portrait focused on the face; the print standard for actor headshots is **8″ × 10″**	Identification - shows current appearance, age group, and features
Three-quarter shot	A portrait that includes the head *and shoulders* (and often to the waist)	Bridges face and body; flattering, versatile
Full-length	The complete figure, head to feet	Demonstrates proportion, posture, and fit
Natural / beauty	Soft styling, clean makeup, direct expression	Shows the model's unembellished look
Commercial	Bright, approachable, "real-person" styling	Appeals to advertising and lifestyle clients
Editorial / fashion	Stylized, high-concept, expressive	Shows range and fashion sensibility

The framing terms above are grounded in portrait-photography convention: the classic portrait focuses on the head alone or the head and shoulders, while full-length figures are typically captured to show the subject in full. A well-rounded book usually moves across this spectrum so that a single model can be pictured for very different jobs.

How many images? There is no regulator-set number, and conventions vary by market and category - treat "a tight, varied set of strong looks" as the guiding principle rather than a fixed count. Quality and range beat volume.

Digitals vs. Portfolio: Why They're Not the Same

This distinction trips up almost every newcomer, so it deserves its own section.

	Portfolio / Book	Comp Card	Digitals

Purpose	Persuade - show range and craft	Summarize - a leave-behind card	Verify - show current, honest appearance
Styling	Fully styled, retouched, art-directed	Best of the portfolio	Minimal: plain background, natural light, little makeup
Format	Physical book and/or digital gallery	Printed card, ~8.5″ × 5.5″ / A5	Simple digital images
When used	In person at go-sees and castings	Left with clients after meetings	Sent to agencies to confirm the "real" look

The portfolio is where a photographer's and stylist's craft shows. Digitals are deliberately the opposite - their value is that they *aren't* enhanced. Both matter, and sending one when the other is expected is a classic misstep.

Practical Implications for Aspiring Models

- **Build the portfolio first, then derive the comp card from it.** The comp card is a compression of your strongest book images - you can't select the "best of" from a book you haven't shot.
- **Match the shot to the goal.** If you're aiming at commercial and lifestyle work, weight your book toward bright, approachable commercial looks; for fashion, include editorial range.
- **Keep digitals current and honest.** Update them whenever your appearance changes (hair, weight, age). Their credibility is the entire point.
- **Standardize your specs.** Use the recognized comp-card format and print your statistics accurately and legibly.
- **Work in a professional environment.** Consistent lighting, backdrops, and styling are what make a set of images read as a coherent, professional book rather than a folder of snapshots. Studios that specialize in modeling portfolios - such as **Studio 1**, which offers portfolio building, comp cards, headshots, and digitals with in-house styling across several U.S. cities - exist to produce exactly this consistency.

Historical Context: Where the Comp Card Came From

The comp card is older and more deliberate than most people assume. Model composites were **invented by Peter Marlowe in London in 1965**, initially printed on A4 format. The format was **changed to A5 in 1972 - specifically for filing purposes** - after which other companies produced their own variants under different names (which is why you'll hear "comp card," "composite card," "zed card," and "sed card" used interchangeably).

That filing-driven redesign is telling: the comp card's size wasn't an aesthetic choice but a practical one, built so agencies and clients could store and flip through talent efficiently. The tool was engineered around how the industry actually works - and that logic still governs the format today. This also aligns with a broader shift noted in modeling history: from the 1960s onward, agencies increasingly took responsibility for a model's promotional materials and branding.

Future Outlook: Print, Digital, and What Stays Constant

Digital portfolios, agency web profiles, and casting platforms have made the *online* book indispensable - many first impressions now happen on a screen before any printed card changes hands. But the underlying grammar has proven durable: a hero image, a range of looks, accurate stats, and a truthful set of digitals. The container is shifting from paper to pixels; the **standard it encodes is not**.

Expect the practical near-term state to remain hybrid: a strong digital portfolio for reach and searchability, a printed comp card for in-person meetings and go-sees, and current digitals for verification. A model who prepares all three to standard is covered regardless of how a given client prefers to receive materials.

Data Tables and Visual Breakdowns (recommended)

For publication, this article should include: (1) a **front/back comp-card layout diagram**, (2) the **Portfolio vs. Comp Card vs. Digitals matrix** above, (3) the **shot-type checklist table** above, (4) a **print-size reference table** (A5 148 × 210 mm; U.S. half-letter 5.5″ × 8.5″; actor headshot 8″ × 10″), and (5) a **downloadable one-page "Portfolio-Ready" checklist** as the primary link and lead asset.

Expert Interpretation / Strategic Commentary

The most useful mental model for a newcomer is to stop thinking of these materials as "photos" and start thinking of them as **standardized documents with jobs to do**. Casting professionals process a high volume of talent; standardization is a courtesy that makes a model easy to evaluate and easy to file - which is exactly why the format was redesigned for filing back in 1972. A book that follows the standard signals professionalism before a single image is judged on its merits. The craft of the images matters enormously, but it sits *on top of* a format that is essentially settled. Learn the standard first; then invest in making each image within it excellent.

FAQ

What is a comp card? A comp card (also called a composite card, zed card, or sed card) is a printed marketing card that showcases a model's best images and key statistics - effectively a model's professional business card, typically about 8.5″ × 5.5″ (or A5).

What's the difference between a comp card and a zed card? None - they're different names for the same thing. Regional and agency preferences produced several names for the identical tool.

What size is a comp card? The common U.S. format is 8.5″ × 5.5″; the metric standard is A5 (148 × 210 mm) on heavy card stock.

What's the difference between digitals and a portfolio? A portfolio is styled, retouched, art-directed work meant to persuade; digitals are clean, minimally styled images meant to show a model's current, honest appearance. They serve opposite purposes.

How many photos should a modeling portfolio include? There's no fixed, regulated number, and it varies by market and category. The principle is a tight, varied set of strong looks - range and quality over volume.

Are comp cards in color or black and white? Almost all are printed in color today, though they may include black-and-white images.

Conclusion

A modeling portfolio, comp card, and set of digitals are not three versions of the same thing - they are three standardized tools with distinct jobs. The portfolio persuades, the comp card summarizes and travels, and the digitals verify. Their formats are knowable, their conventions are consistent, and the standard behind them has held for decades even as the medium moves online. Learn the standard, build to it, and you remove the single most common thing that separates amateur materials from professional ones. Use this page as your reference - and the downloadable checklist as your pre-shoot gut check.

Note: Conventions described here are widely recognized baselines. Specific requirements can vary by agency, market, and modeling category.